



Honorable Elsie Arntzen
Chairperson, Local Government Committee
Montana Legislative Branch
Helena, MT

29 January 2009

Re: HB 336, Revising duties of fire district trustees and boards

Dear Committee:

I have written this document to voice my opposition to House bill 336.

At first glance I thought this was a good bill, might make my life easier as far as collecting information goes, but then when I looked at the criteria needed in the report, I find this information is readily available upon request. Putting myself in the shoes of the individuals that would have to submit this report, I would find it unnecessary and just one more thing that I probably do not have time to do, especially on my own time as a volunteer.

Being from rural Madison County and over 90% of our responders are volunteers, I feel the boards and fire chiefs have enough to do and if I or the Commissioners want this information, it is there for the asking. The last thing our volunteers need is another redundant report that may or may not be used by the entities receiving said report.

As I said, I am in a rural county and this information is easily received upon request, and I believe this is an issue for the counties, not a statewide mandate.

Respectfully yours,

Christopher W. Mumme
Director, Emergency Management
Madison County



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To the Members of the House Local Government Committee,

You are considering HB336, a proposal to require fire districts to report to county commissions. This simple change is a serious move that will have extremely deep consequences. It is important for you to know that changing this law will require many other changes in how various levels of government operate.

The most important effect of the proposed change is to reduce the stature of Montana fire districts to make them subservient to county commissions. Currently, fire districts are local government agencies that are separate from and equal to county commissions with board members elected by the property owners of the districts. At least that is what our county attorney tells us. If the proposed change is made to require the filing of reports to the commission, what is the reason? The implication is that the county will now be responsible for the performance of all its fire districts. If a district is underperforming, will the county now be responsible for making improvements? Are the district boards to give up their legal responsibilities and let the county take over? I do not think the counties want this liability. What commissioner has the time to review the thousands of pages of information that would be generated each year?

Most fire districts are challenged to find good trustees to serve on their boards. The proposal greatly increases the workload for trustees. As a consequence, it would be more difficult to find willing candidates to become trustees. If the proposed reporting is required, who will gather the information? The board will probably dump the responsibility onto the fire chief who is already overburdened. I suspect that the proponents of this bill are paid fire chiefs with paid staffs. In their case, the extra burden can be pushed downstream to someone who gets paid for their efforts. But the fire districts of the state are volunteer. The person who ends up putting these reports together is not getting paid. Just for fun, you might make some estimates on how many hours would be required to comply with the proposed rules. Our estimate came to 47 hours, and that is only if the district already tracks all of its responses, training, public service, and other activities. Who will give up over a full week to create a report that will not be read? It is like building a bridge to nowhere.

Please table this bill. It is an unreasonable burden on our state's volunteers.

Sincerely yours,

Alan Tresemer, Executive Director